New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1948

Volume IX, Number 21 • Rachel W. Coffin, *Editor* • Week of November 1, 1948

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"Minnie and Mr. Williams"

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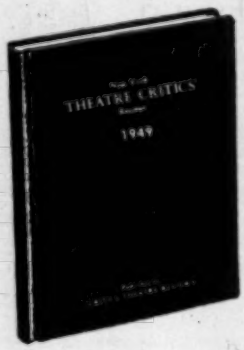

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"Minnie and Mr. Williams"

New York World-Telegram

OCTOBER 28, 1948

'Minnie' Tells a Dull Parable on Stage

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

The chalk talk of an uninspired parable is told in many more words than deeds in "Minnie and Mr. Williams." The play has a great deal to say about good and evil, how they are related and which produces which. It seems designed for the ruminations of a 10-year-old, but has neither the drama nor the straightforwardness that might appeal to youngsters.

There should be humorous potentialities in the prospect of a Welsh minister's wife suddenly acquiring a jaunty new leg where there was none before, particularly when she is impersonated by the bubbly Josephine Hull.

Miss Hull, however, has pretty much to make up her own jokes about the limb, which must have been magically inherited from a can-can dancer. It kicks harmoniums and postmen at will, but hardly provides enough whimsy or humor for a whole evening.

No Danger Signal.

There should be a special kind of danger signal outside theaters where there are plays in which a child of inexplicable antecedents plops down on an unsophisticated, God-fearing couple. In this particular case the minx is in minor league with the devil and her chief ambition is to perform some deed of unadulterated evil. If she succeeds one presumes she will be promoted to something like one of those witch girls in "Dark of the Moon" and eventually to just a plain old Lorelei.

Before she really gets going here, she is driven out by a character known as Owain Flatfish, who understands the real reason why she was burned by a little cross, and sent up a flare when she touched the Bible. When she comes back to conduct the minister, now passed on, to hell, Owain confronts her with the news that he is what she describes "the local plain clothes angel."

Fun as Flatfish.

Their debate involves a most confusing theological set-to, and the curtain comes down on Miss Hull endeavoring to play a hymn, while her restless leg persists in rehearsing one half of the Texas Tommy.

Eddie Dowling is lugubrious and puzzled as the good reverend, and Elizabeth Ross is sprightly as the devil's protegee. Clarence Derwent, alone of the cast, seems to have a really good time as Mr. Flatfish, whether he is exorcising the evil maiden or indulging in pompous debate with her.

"Minnie and Mr. Williams" was written a good many years ago and it is not surprising that it was never considered meaty enough for professional production here before. Out of respect for its Welsh setting, it is written in some of the most annoyingly perverted grammar ever heard.

'MINNIE AND MR. WILLIAMS'

MINNIE AND MR. WILLIAMS, a "comedy of good and evil" in three acts, by Richard Hughes. Staged by Eddie Dowling; produced by John Gassner and David Dietz; setting and costumes by Mordi Gassner. At the Morosco Theatre.

Rev. John Williams	Eddie Dowling
Minnie	Josephine Hull
Timothy Yaspistrews	Paul Anderson
Mari Jones	Lee Wilcox
Gladys	Elizabeth Ross
Owain Flatfish	Clarence Derwent
Sergeant Evan	Gwilym Williams
Mrs. Jones Bakehouse	Grace Mills
Mr. Gas Jones	Geoffrey Lumb
Mrs. Resurrection Jones	Gywneth Hughes

SYNOPSIS: The action takes place in the kitchen of the Williams' cottage in a Welsh village at the turn of the century. Act I, Scene 1. About nine o'clock of a September evening. Scene 2. About seven-thirty the next morning. Act II. Immediately afterwards. Act III. A year later.

DAILY NEWS

OCTOBER 28, 1948

'Minnie and Mr. Williams' a Gentle Fantasy About a Little Girl Devil

By JOHN CHAPMAN

Like a small, warm candle, "Minnie and Mr. Williams" shines like a good deed in a naughty world. This bit of whimsey by Richard Hughes was offered last evening by John Gassner and David Dietz at the Morosco Theatre. It is gentle, charming, affectionate and delightfully played by Josephine Hull, Eddie Dowling and a rather interestingly selected supporting cast. Its only misdeed is that it has come to the Morosco Theatre, which, being on 45th St. west of Broadway, is practically the plumb center of our naughty world.

"Minnie" is a play which attracts affection, but at the same time one feels sorry for it because it seems so defenseless. In a happier and more generous time than ours it should live a long time, in a theatre removed from the world of Broadway. But there aren't any theatres removed from the world of Broadway any more; there are no havens for little plays which are gentle, charming and affectionate.

A Hellion Arrives.

"Minnie and Mr. Williams" is a Welsh fable about a minister and his wife into whose modest home comes a hellion. Literally, a hellion. A girl emissary of Satan who has come to promote the cause of evil as enthusiastically and believingly as any Rotarian ever fostered the philosophy of brotherhood among hardware merchants.

Mrs. Minnie Williams is a pleasant homebody, who, though Welsh, talks a little like Lou Holtz telling about his friend Lapidus—in sentences which have few verbs and no adjectives. She has a wooden leg. She is the wife of Mr. Williams, the village minister, and they live in a modest but solid little house which has been beautifully designed and lighted by Mordi Gassner.

Minnie would like to have a cat, or a dog, or even a child, to liven up the home. So in comes a waif whom they name Gladys. Gladys spits like a cat when she comes near the Bible, but she does nice things like giving Minnie a new, live leg. Gladys is frankly a hellion; she is from the nether world and she is doing all she can to promote its advantages in a place which thinks heaven is better.

Good overcomes evil, in a mild sort of way. Gladys gives herself a day off and does a bad thing: she fixes it for Mr. Williams to go to heaven when he dies. And that is more of the plot than even Mr. Hughes wrote.

Mrs. Hull's performance as Mrs. Williams is lovable, and her struggles with her new and hell-born leg are comic. Mr. Dowling is pleasantly sanctimonious as a puzzled man of God who finds an imp in his home. Elizabeth Ross, who began her career by playing Bernadette in "The Song of Bernadette," makes a wily little messenger from Beelzebub, and the other members of the company provide Welsh characters and songs.

I am sure that "Minnie and Mr. Williams" will go straight to heaven when it passes on.

The Sun

OCTOBER 28, 1943

By WARD MOREHOUSE

An Irksome Fantasy.

"Minnie and Mr. Williams" is a comedy that brings forth an able dramatic critic as a producer; that calls upon the services of one of our best actresses, and that has been staged by a professional director of years of experience—and what happens? Their play isn't worth all the trouble.

Richard Hughes's fantasy, now a quarter of a century old, was put on last night at the Morosco by John Gassner, of the Critics' Circle, and David Dietz. It is a play of good and evil, of the spectral and supernatural, and it turns out to be an irksome theater piece, and one with scant merriment scattered through it.

Here is the fable of a demoniacal sprite named Gladys, in the service of the devil, and with intentions peculiarly hellish, who comes in upon a Welsh minister and his ailing wife, Minnie. Mr. Williams is a good man. Minnie has a wooden leg and does her bit of complaining. Well, Gladys gives Minnie a new leg, a leg that is lively and red-slippered, thereby causing consternation among the villagers, who are not accustomed to miracles.

Eventually, Mr. Williams dies, but Gladys, liking him and knowing that a man of such goodness would be a misfit in the infernal domain, shirks her duty and packs him off to Heaven. Minnie and her rebellious leg live on.

"Minnie and Mr. Williams" is a play of material not ordinarily found in the theater, and it has interludes of quaintness and humor, but it never becomes the joocse fantasy it must have seemed when John Gassner decided to produce it and Josephine Hull and Eddie Dowling agreed to play in it. Miss Hull, now given a genuinely deserved stardom—see the lights outside the Morosco—brings her blithe jabbering and her murmurings and her quick movements and startled glances to her playing and she frequently succeeds in enlivening the proceedings, but we have come to know her in better parts and in better plays.

Eddie Dowling, somberly wearing wig and beard, has a skimpy part and he remains for most of the evening, one of the dullest Welshmen ever despatched Heavenward. Elizabeth Ross, once a saint in "The Song of Bernadette," scampers and crouches and occasionally explodes as the young messenger from Hell, and she has some effective moments. There are amusing performances from players appearing as the startled villagers—Lee Wilcox as Mari Jones, Grace Mills as Mrs. Bakehouse, Gwyneth Hughes as Mrs. Resurrection Jones. Clarence Derwent uses his precise diction in the playing of the guardian angel.

The play offers the good, detailed direction that you would expect from Eddie Dowling and an excellent and atmospheric kitchen-living room in a Welsh cottage that was designed by Mordi Gassner. But "Minnie and Mr. Williams" is trivial and monotonous.

NEW YORK STAR

OCTOBER 29, 1943

by John Lardner

Paradox in a Word-Shroud

Good may be evil, evil good, depending on the circumstances and the point of view. I suppose you could get that thought into the better class of nutshell without much trouble, but Richard Hughes, the Welsh poet, playwright, and novelist, has put it into a three-act play instead, name of *Minnie and Mr. Williams*, and, speaking frankly, the fit is very loose—a puny paradox (as treated by Mr. Hughes) lost in a shroud of words.

They are strange words, too, that congest the stage of the Morosco, where the new comedy opened Wednesday night. Mr. Hughes is an authority, probably, on the speech-ways of elderly Welsh women at the turn of the century, and our contemporary comic-strip writers and radio comedians will be startled to know that the dialect they universally attribute to Russians, and sometimes Frenchmen, these days is really Welsh.

• • •

"If cat seeing bacon," says Josephine Hull, in the part of Minnie, "cat eating it, if cat can reaching it."

At least, I think that's what she says. I know for sure that she speaks in nothing but participles from the start of the play to the end, and it's a tribute to her sterling talent, and her patience and good will, that she is steadily amusing in the face of these odds.

G. B. Shaw, an admirer of Mr. Hughes, has been quoted as saying that anyone who does not enjoy "Minnie and Mr. Williams" must be an idiot. Here, I think, Mr. Shaw is challenging the tendencies of the industrial age, a restless age when even geniuses are apt to be bored to death by two whole hours of talk without action—I mean talk in which they don't participate themselves. I think also that the cross-grained Mr. Shaw would admit his boredom if he thought anybody else liked the play.

It may be, of course, that "Minnie" stirred in him a faint nostalgia for some of the thinest and talkiest of his paradox plays, though it is far wordier and slimmer than anything he ever perpetrated.

• • •

To Mr. Williams (Eddie Dowling), a childless Church of England clergyman in a Welsh village, and his wife (Miss Hull) there arises a friend of hell, the literal kind, in the form of a young girl dressed like Fannie Brice as Baby Snooks. This part is played by Elizabeth Ross. She not only looks like Miss Brice, she acts somewhat like her, within the limits of Mr. Hughes's gentle libretto.

As a symbol of her infernal nature, she sings *Frankie and Johny*—an Americanism which was grafted onto the play, I take it, by John Gassner, the co-producer. She does not sing any of the really rough verses, like the one beginning "The verdict was first-degree murder." In fact, she is not really a bad imp. Conventional evil is for her the highest and purest good, and her purpose in the Williams home is the honest one of buying for her sponsor the soul of the clergyman. When, at the final curtain, she yields this soul to heaven by default, she feels guilty, because her good deed is, by her own lights, a wicked and slothful one.

• • •

I liked Miss Ross pretty well, though a dose of Miss Brice, the true Snooks, might have given the play some badly needed vigor. I liked a brief colloquy in Latin, with parenthetical translations, between Miss Ross and Clarence Derwent, the preacher's guardian angel. I liked the loyal and uphill work of Miss Hull, and the skill with which she manipulates, as though against her will, a brand new leg in a red shoe and silk stocking, a gift from hell to replace one she had lost before the play began. The performance of Mr. Dowling is so subdued that there is absolutely no difference between the clergyman alive in the first two acts and the clergyman dead in Act 3.

Well, that's all there is: two or three nice jobs of acting, and one or two lighter patches of talk in a waste of words that drab and dim beyond hope of salvation.

The New York Times

OCTOBER 28, 1948

Josephine Hull and Eddie Dowling Appear in Richard Hughes' 'Minnie and Mr. Williams'

By BROOKS ATKINSON

To put the good news first, Josephine Hull has a part that she can lavish some invention on. For years one of our most endearing actresses has been type-cast in plays that have given her steady employment. In "Minnie and Mr. Williams," which opened at the Morosco last evening, she is not likely to keep working very long. For the Richard Hughes fantasy, which used to be known as "A Comedy of Good and Evil," is tenuous and untheatrical—too slight for a full evening in the theatre.

But Mrs. Hull is cast in the imaginative part of a Welsh woman who falls heir to a perverse miracle. She is Minnie, the wife of a pure-hearted though indigent clergyman, and she has one wooden leg. They both give refuge to a child who is the devil's disciple and who in a moment of illegal goodness gives Minnie a real flesh-and-blood leg. Although the leg is wonderful, it is mischievous and diabolical, acts up at the wrong moments and kicks out at the wrong people.

* * *

In cold type this may not seem like a hot part, but in Mrs. Hull's expert hands, it is very warm indeed. Puffing and flouncing cheerfully around the stage, she plays it with an extraordinary lightness—humorous and motherly, impish and beneficent. Without losing contact with reality, she manages to create a richly-fanciful character with bird-like rushes around the stage and a variety of puzzled but good-natured emotions. There are thousands of theatregoers who have been devoted to Mrs. Hull for years. They will be glad to know that after a long period of honest trouping she has a part that, quite literally, she can play with and does.

Mr. Hughes' drama is more literary than dramatic. In a fairy-story mood, he is writing about a simple and good couple who give shelter to a little girl who is in bondage to the devil. She is supposed to reclaim the pure-hearted dominie for Beelzebub. But it seems to be Mr. Hughes' notion that good and evil react upon each other and are closely interrelated. The goodness of the dominie and his wife tempt the devil's sprite into doing good deeds.

Like a prose-writer, Mr. Hughes is inclined to argue those things instead of dramatizing them. Although "Minnie and Mr. Williams" has a good deal of charm and some ingratiating spiritual speculations, it is thin and artless as a drama.

What there is in it Eddie Dowling, as the director and as Mr. Williams, has drawn out of the text and put on the stage. He plays the clergyman with genuine simplicity and sincerity. Slight as the part is, this is one of Mr. Dowling's best performances. Elizabeth Ross plays the devil's sprite with childlike gaiety and guile.

* * *

Clarence Derwent, the elegant president of Actors Equity, has not been on the stage in his old clothes for many years. Cast as an illiterate and no doubt noisome fishmonger, he gives a notably able performance in a singularly raffish costume. In the last act the fishmonger doubles as a guardian angel in some most imposing robes and Mr. Derwent gives some real theatrical quality to some very closely reasoned dialogue.

"Minnie and Mr. Williams" has been hospitably housed in a country interior designed by Mordi Gassner, who has basted up the costumes, too. It is the first production by David Dietz and John Gassner. Mr. Gassner is an erudite critic, working the other and more dangerous side of the street. If he decides to come back to this side, he can have the satisfaction of remembering that he has given Mrs. Hull the most malleable part she has had for years.

Journal-American

OCTOBER 28, 1948

Fine Performances In Muddled Play

By ROBERT GARLAND

Mastheaded on the programs at the Morosco where, in the presence of an amiable assemblage, "Minnie and Mr. Williams" has made its professional New York debut, the names of the participating theatricians may be read and pondered. In type of various sizes, they range from Josephine Hull and Eddie Dowling, the stars, down to Richard Hughes, the author.

The names of Miss Hull and Mr. Dowling are the largest. The name of Mr. Hughes is the smallest. Between are the names of Elizabeth Ross and Clarence Derwent, the featured players. All of which is simple justice. For, as stars and featured players, Miss Hull and Mr. Dowling, Miss Ross and Mr. Derwent, contribute most generously to the evening's entertainment.

As author, Mr. Hughes contributes most meagerly. In a "Comedy of Good and Evil", which is the rightful title, the author has written a heavy metaphysical fantasy which grows heavier as the performance wanes. Even the fine production provided by John Gassner and David Dietz, welcome new show-businessmen, does not manage to redeem it from disinterest.

The truth is that "Minnie and Mr. Williams," either as fun, fantasy or footlighted metaphysics, does not come off. Come off, I mean, in the less literal usage of the phrase.

* * *

Leg to Stand On

The author whose name is the smallest on the Morosco's masthead is the Richard Hughes whose "The Innocent Voyage", the rightful title of which is "A High Wind in Jamaica", ran from November to December when produced here at the Belasco five years ago. As "A Comedy of Good and Evil", "Minnie and Mr. Williams" met with a less lengthy reception in New York in 1938.

Now, as then, its up-hilly, down-daley plotage attempts to show how the Spirit of Evil, in the person of a girl called Gladys, challenges the Spirit of Good, in the person of a parson called John. Minnie, his lawful wedded wife, has a woeful wooden leg. But Gladys, the devil's miracle worker, gives her a new one right away. A real one, too. And kind of kittenish.

This leg is all the new arrival at the Morosco has to stand on. But, shakily, perhaps, it serves more frequently than not. So Minnie, having inherited the gay gam of a Gambarelli, dances in her Mordi Gassner old Welsh cottage, kicking up and carrying on like a belligerent ballerina. And when her good husband dies and returns like Lazarus——.

Frankly, I forget what finally happens when the holy Mr. Williams goes to his reward, the unholy Gladys goes to her reward, and Minnie, with loved ones far away, sits down to enjoy their absence.

* * *

Miss Hull Hailed

It should have, it must have, gladdened the heart of Josephine Hull to receive last night's welcome from that amiable assemblage. A Broadway star for the first time in her honorable career, Miss Hull brings all her skill, charm and comprehension to The Reverend John Williams' Minnie. It is a play-long role that has play-long need for it. And gets it, too!

Eddie Dowling, co-starring, finds The Reverend John Williams an agreeable and not-too-difficult assignment. With a straight face of his own and a beard by Ira Senz, his Cambrian holy-man is more bearable than believable. And, as director of last night's doing-over, he does better by Miss Hull's Minnie than by his own bewitched, bothered and bewildered preacher.

You have not lived theatrically until you have seen Clarence Derwent as Owain Flatfish, mortal-into-angel. As Gladys, Satan-in-seminary clothing, Elizabeth Ross fulfills every fine, young promise she made as the saintly Bernadette and Mary Sarratt's unhappy daughter, Anna. The others are as good as they can be. So is the single Mordi Gassner setting . . .

At the Morosco, the play is not the thing. For whatever lasting Broadway merits "Minnie and Mr. Williams" may possess, they stem from the big-lettered theatricians on the masthead of the program.